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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 000323

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/18/2016

TAGS: PGOV PINR PTER TH

SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: SEPARATIST'S ARREST REVEALS

POLICE CONFUSION

REF: BANGKOK 000112

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR SUSAN M. SUTTON FOR REASON 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Ref detailed the arrest of suspected separatist Mareepeng Maha on January 5 by Thai police. Hailed as one of Thailand's "most wanted," Mareepeng had reportedly fled to Malaysia to escape arrest, only to return to Thailand in recent weeks. Thai officials trumpeted his arrest, itself based on the interrogation of another suspect, as a major step forward in their efforts to stem the violence in the restive South. A closer look at the story behind the arrest, however, calls into question Mareepeng's role in the violence, points to continued miscoordination among police officials and highlights Thai officials' breathless desire to spin any action as major progress. End Summary.

THAILAND'S MOST WANTED

¶2. (C) On January 5, police officers from Bangkok's Crime Suppression division arrested Mareepeng Maha, 33 years old, in Narathiwat and charged him with conspiracy to kill police officers for his alleged role in a 2001 attack. According to press reports and our initial conversations with police contacts, Mareepeng is a key member of the separatist group Gerakan Mujahidin Islam Pattani (GMIP--a small group of Afghan jihad veterans active in the mid 1990s) involved in several separatist attacks. Following the issuance of warrants for his arrest in 2002, Mareepeng reportedly fled to Malaysia.

¶3. (C) Adding sizzle to the story was the reported genesis of this arrest. According to police officials involved, the tip-off came from interrogations of Mana-se Che-lo, a member of the separatist group the Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO) who was recently extradited from Malaysia. Thai officials were quick to hail Mareepeng's detention as a major blow against the separatists. Armed Forces Supreme Commander Ruengroj Mahasaranond even told reporters a week later that the situation in the South had improved considerably after Mareepeng's arrest.

CRIMINAL KARAOKE CONFUSION

¶4. (C) But the basic story, of a separatist leader arrested as soon as he had returned to Thailand to do further harm, was soon called into question by the local press. Two days after Mareepeng's arrest, the newspaper the Nation reported that Mareepeng had turned himself into Thai authorities in April 2005 and had been released on bail. Since that time (and while his case was pending in the courts) he has been living quietly at home and working in a local rubber plantation. Indeed, several prominent local politicians, including a former ruling party Thai Rak Thai parliamentarian who had negotiated Mareepeng's surrender in April, told reporters that they were shocked by the arrest, which involved nearly 50 police officers from Bangkok storming into Mareepeng's house during a karaoke session with friends.

BAD COP! NO DONUT!

¶5. (C) According to police Col. Ronnaosit Phusara, a Superintendent in the Police Crime Suppression Division (CSD) with responsibility for the South, Mareepeng had three separate warrants out for his arrest from three separate police jurisdictions in Narathiwat. When Mareepeng turned himself into the Ministry of Justice's Department of Special Investigation (DSI) in April to face a separate national security charge that was outstanding, two of these local police stations served him with their warrants. The third station, for reasons unclear, was not able to. Bangkok-based CSD officials re-arrested him this month to serve the third warrant, apparently without coordinating with local or DSI officials. (Note. Both DSI and CSD have nationwide jurisdiction and have been charged with handling all cases connected to Southern unrest. It is not clear when responsibility for Mareepeng's third, local arrest warrant was transferred to CSD. End Note.)

COMMENT

¶6. (C) Tales of poor Thai military-police coordination are legion, especially in the South, but this case highlights how

bad inter-police efficacy can be as well. Though none of our contacts will come out and say such, it appears to us that CSD officials in Bangkok, looking to make a big arrest to start off the new year, charged into a local situation only to get egg on their faces. Mareepeng's importance to the separatist violence remains unclear: he is either a small fish who had been out on bail whose exploits have been exaggerated by CSD, or a major player in the insurgency who DSI should not have released on bail. Either way, this case--which we will continue to follow--does not inspire confidence in the efforts of the Thai police.

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